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AUTHOR Sherman-Day, Marti; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The South Central Ohio Regional Training Center (SCRTC) is one of the Centers established in response to a directive from the Ohio State Department of Education to: (1) provide teacher-centered professional development experiences that build on the values of collegiality; (2) strengthen teacher leadership in educational improvement and change; (3) provide opportunities for professional development of teachers in new instructional strategies and instructional organization; (4) assist improved assessment practices; and (5) utilize the integration of new technologies and telecommunications. The role of the SCRTC is to provide funds, resources, support, training, professional expertise, and guidance to assist individual sites to begin the process of identifying appropriate systemic change for each unit (individuals, group, building, district). The SCRTC works toward educational reform by assisting with the formation of model sites. Participants at each selected model site (teachers, parents, administrators, etc.) will participate in initial professional development which will assist in defining and working within new roles, planning and decision making, possible alternatives to present delivery systems, and evaluation of the process. Selected sites, which have had their proposals approved, will design a restructuring plan to be implemented during 1993-1994. The restructuring plan will address school governance, teaching/learning delivery processes, school organization structure, and alternative forms of assessment. (IAH)

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A Grassroots Collaborative Approach to Professional Development

The South Central Ohio Regional Training
Center

Marti Sherman-Day

Steve Kingery

George Lawson

Madelyn Migyanko

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The South Central Ohio Regional Training Center
A Grassroots Collaborative Approach to Professional Development

The Ohio Department of Education established a unique plan for providing professional development for teachers to begin in the fiscal year 1992-1993. The state was divided into eight regions. Each of the eight regions of the state was invited to submit a plan for a regional teacher training center for that region. The focus of the program, as defined by the Department of Education, was to:

1. Provide teacher-centered professional development experiences that build on the values of collegiality,
2. Strengthen teacher leadership in educational improvement and change,
3. Provide opportunities for professional development of teachers in new instructional strategies and instructional organization,
4. Assist improved assessment practices, and
5. Utilize the integration of new technologies and telecommunications.

The Challenges

The first challenge the South Region had to face was how to involve all 39 school districts in the eight county region and gain active participation of over 4,000 teachers in a wide geographic region. The region also has two universities—the University of Rio Grande, a private university, and Shawnee State University, a five year old state institution—and two regional campuses of Ohio University.

The second challenge was creating a governance structure that provided an active voice to everyone involved. Who would make the decisions? How could decisions be made so that the needs of the diverse population were met? How could we determine the needs of the individuals involved?

The third challenge was to determine the role and function of the South Central Regional Training Center. Would the center provide inservice opportunities at one or more sites on general topics of interest? Would the center function as the procurer of workshop leaders for local inservice workshops? Should the center distribute funds to each school district so that each could provide for its own inservice needs? What kind of training is needed?

Gaining Active Participation

Four of the counties in the region had formed the South Central Ohio Inservice Council in 1985. This group consisted of administrators of the school districts in the four counties who had voluntarily pooled resources to provide low cost continuing education opportunities for teachers. The Inservice Council offered its services in creating a regional training center by inviting representatives from the eight county region to its regular meeting for the purpose of creating an eight county consortium.

This new group of representatives invited from all eight counties continued to meet monthly. The number of individuals involved grew very quickly until all of the 39 school districts were represented. A position paper outlining the objectives and plans for the Regional Training Center was drafted and submitted to each district.

An invitation for collaboration was sent to all of the school districts and to the four university sites in the South Region. A planning committee was formed to

develop an organizational structure and to write the grant proposal. The South Region obtained the support and commitment to collaboration from all of the school districts in the region. An organizational structure was designed and a grant proposal was written and accepted by the Ohio Department of Education.

Governance

The organizational structure (Figure 1) consists of an Oversight Board with representatives from each of the eighteen Educational Service Agencies (ESA) in the region (several of these Service Agencies involve more than one school district). The Oversight Board has three representatives from each ESA—two teachers and an administrator. The Oversight Board Representatives are responsible for meeting with their District In-school Teams at least once a month. The District In-school Teams are teacher representatives from each school in the ESA. The In-school Teams are responsible for identifying the needs of the teachers and communicating these needs to the Oversight Board Representatives. The role of the Project Director is to act as a facilitator and coordinator of the South Central Regional Training Center activities.

Figure 1



A monthly newsletter is distributed to all members of the consortium. This serves as a means of communicating to everyone concerning the activities, the current projects, the innovations that are working, those that are not working, and ideas submitted by the teachers and administrators.

One of the major goals of the consortium for the first year is to link each school via electronic communication and to encourage and support on-going communication between teachers. In the second year, the consortium will begin plans to expand this network to include each classroom and to encourage students to communicate with each other.

The Role and Function of the Regional Training Center

Initially, the South Central Regional Training Center developed a method of systematic needs assessment by each district. Each district would work with a consultant to determine the best solution to its need, and the Center would provide support in the form of resources and some funding to help meet the need. It soon became evident, however, that this plan did not address true systemic restructuring. The Center's Oversight Board recognized that a more clear shared vision among the participants was required in order to facilitate educational reform. The following is a statement of shared beliefs concerning systemic reform and a plan for initiating restructuring was developed.

The South Central Regional Training Center (SCRTC) believes that

- ☛ the classroom teacher is more knowledgeable about what needs to be done than any other single individual,
- ☛ good conscientious teachers are constantly seeking ways to educate all students,

- if we fail with one student, we are not successful, and
- model sites should be established and supported to investigate reform techniques.

We recognize the need for systemic change instead of new programs layered on top of an old system. The role of the SCRTC will be to provide funds, resources, support, training, professional expertise, guidance, and a network of other educational reformers to assist the sites to begin the process of identifying appropriate systemic change for each unit (individuals, group, building, district).

Why is this process unique? How is this different from other educational reform plans?

1. We know that we don't know the answers.
2. We know that there is not necessarily one answer.
3. Each site will be given the opportunity and support to investigate alternatives to the present "mode of operation".
4. Alternatives will be generated from the classroom level, not mandated from a higher authority.
5. Each model site will be given support in the investigation of alternatives.

The South Central Regional Training Center will work toward educational reform by assisting with the formation of model sites. The goal of the model sites is to develop a process by which every child will learn. To accomplish this goal, we will need to foster behavior changes in the educators and create an atmosphere in which change can continue. Each site will develop a plan for restructuring that is appropriate for that setting, but that

- * is student- and teacher-centered,
- * changes the way students learn and teachers teach, requiring both to assume greater initiative,

- * applies to all students,
- * affects curriculum as well as organization, and
- * has a central vision within the school to which all involved subscribe.

The restructuring plans will involve a new look at the current practices.

Changes might include

- ☐ flexible use of space,
- ☐ less regimented scheduling patterns,
- ☐ nontraditional grouping patterns within classes,
- ☐ more flexible instructional arrangements,
- ☐ less emphasis on self-contained classrooms, and/or
- ☐ less use of age grouping patterns.

The model sites are being supported in the belief that all students can learn, that all students learn differently, and that all teachers teach differently. Each proposed site needs to show evidence of

1. the full cooperation of a group of teachers, the building administrators, the local administrators, and the ESA administrators (where they are different from local administrators),
2. a willingness to explore a variety of options,
3. the flexibility to look beyond traditional structures of education,
4. a commitment to professional development for everyone involved, and
5. community support.

The participants (teachers, administrators, parents, etc.) of each selected model site will participate in initial professional development which will assist in defining and working within new roles, planning/decision making, possible alternatives to the present delivery system, and evaluation of the process.

Phase One will begin with proposals submitted to the Oversight Board of the SCRTC. This proposal signifies a request to become a model site for educational reform. This proposal represents commitment to investigate alternatives to the present methods of delivery of instruction. The proposal is designed to demonstrate awareness of the challenge of educational reform. Applicants are not expected to have a plan for reform at this time. The balance of this school year will be spent investigating various methods of restructuring, determining methods that might be appropriate for each site, and designing a restructuring plan to be implemented during the 1993-1994 school year. Each restructuring plan will address

1. school governance,
2. teaching/learning delivery processes,
3. school organization structure, and
4. alternative forms of assessment.

Advantages and Concerns

There have been some unexpected benefits as a result of this type of structure. As the plans and activities of the consortium have become known to the community at large, groups and individuals have approached the consortium with ideas and suggestions. Funding agencies have provided information for possible grants to meet the needs of the consortium. The South Central Regional Training Center has become a clearing house for dissemination of information to the schools in the region.

Each of the ripples of the governance structure has provided new experiences in collaboration and shared expertise among the members. One of the most exciting experiences has been to watch the ideas and plans evolve through input from so many professional educators. We sometimes have to go

back to some of the early documents to remind us how far we have come in the last 12 months.

Paradigm paralysis or shackles of the mind. It is challenging for educators to clear the slate and think in terms of creating a new picture. The proposal for becoming a model site has three sections.

1. List the active participants who will be involved in creating your individual restructuring plan.
2. What do you want to see changed from present practice? As you perceive it, what is the problem with the current educational delivery system?
3. How can the South Central Regional Training Center assist you in identifying alternatives to the current educational delivery system?

Many individuals got very busy creating a plan for restructuring and a budget. It was very difficult for those involved to think in such simple terms. One of our members put it nicely when he said, "Our biggest challenge is to remove the shackles of our mind."

The governance structure is dependent on the members in each expanding circle to maintain the flow of information. We recognize that this is not always consistent and thorough. However, we have found that the excitement is contagious. As we share and grow in a true framework of collegiality, the more consistent and thorough we are becoming.

The SCRTC is establishing a professional development center based upon the belief that the best way to cure paradigm paralysis is to work in a collaborative manner and take one small step at a time. When we try to create the final draft before we have built each of the parts, we become dependent upon old paradigms because that is what we know.